

Honoring the Sabbath
Exodus 20:8-11; Gen. 12:1-9
May 31, 2009
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Well, here we are. It's May 31. You know, we've been talking about and planning this sabbatical for so long that I never actually expected it to happen. It's always been something "out there" or "coming up," but today we stand on the cusp of this new chapter in our relationship and in the life of the church.

I've learned through this process that a sabbatical is not a familiar concept to a lot of people. There's something that seems a bit strange about giving someone three months off from work with pay. I don't mind it so much but I could see where, in this workaholic world, it could seem foreign. Believe me, I feel the weight of responsibility and level of trust that such a thing conveys, and I don't have the words to express my gratitude to you. The Sabbatical Planning Team and I have tried to provide some education and context to help the congregation understand exactly what a sabbatical is and how it is to be used.

So what is it? What are these next three months? I've most often heard it called a "vacation," which I admit makes me cringe a bit. Our American understanding of vacation is going someplace warm and sunny, lounging around a pool sipping drinks with little plastic umbrellas. As Michael pointed out in his May newsletter article, vacation comes from the Latin root which means "to be empty, free or at leisure," which means vacations are times to be free from obligations and to be at leisure (as opposed to "be at work").

Based on that definition, I most certainly won't be on vacation. Yes, I will be free from the day-to-day, week-to-week demands of ministry, but I am committed to doing other things like reading, writing and attending conferences, that will keep me connected to my vocation and God's calling. In some sense I will still be working on my sabbatical, including as Michael said, "doing the work of resting," but I will be working with a different focus and at a different pace than when I am in the office. My promise to you and to God is that I am committed to being a better minister when I come back.

Another way to speak of time away is what our friends in England call a "holiday." To go on holiday is to take a break, to get away from the daily routines of life. I like this term because it derives from the two words "holy day." Something that's holy is something sacred, something set apart by God. I certainly hope my sabbatical time is filled with holiness, a time set apart by God. But I don't do a good British accent so I can't go around all summer saying "I'm on holiday." That just won't work and could get me arrested.

The term that best describes what's happening this summer is a "sabbatical," and it fits so well because of its biblical origin. The word obviously comes from the word "Sabbath," which is what was addressed in our first reading today. One of the 10 Commandments God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai was to remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Just as God did the work of rest on the seventh day of creation, so the Israelites and all of their workers were to do the work of rest every seven days. The purpose of the Sabbath was to honor God's creation, to rest up from the week before, and to rejuvenate for the week ahead. Similarly, I am plan on honoring God, resting up from the eight years that have come before, and rejuvenate for whatever lies ahead. I continue to be blessed by working with this congregation, but I am also ready, albeit it three years late, to step away and allow my spirit to refill for continuing to do God's work. I am looking forward to doing the work of resting.

But Sabbath is about more than just rest. It's also about worship. The idea behind the Sabbath was to take time you would normally commit to work and instead commit it to God. On my sabbatical one of the things I'm most looking forward to doing is worshipping God, unencumbered by the responsibilities of my work. I can't wait to remember what it feels like to sit in a pew for an entire service. I plan on visiting a number of other churches and doing some in-depth Bible reading as ways of worshipping God, neither of which I get to do very often while I'm working.

I've put a number of other activities and events into my sabbatical plan. I did that for a couple of reasons. First, I want the congregation to benefit from my sabbatical, and I don't mean not having to listen to me preach for three months, although there may be some benefits there, as well. The work that I will be doing on sabbatical is not just the work of rest, but the work of renewal. That includes stepping back from the daily obligations to look at the bigger picture of who we are as a church by focusing more closely on our mission statement. The conferences I'll be attending, the books I'll be reading and the things I'll be writing will hopefully have a direct impact on this church as we continue to explore who God has called us to be. I want my sabbatical to be purposeful rest that benefits you as well as me.

Another reason I put together a detailed sabbatical plan is because I like to know what's coming. If this is more than a vacation or a holiday, then I need to prove it, I need to justify – most importantly to myself – why I'm taking a sabbatical. I've always agreed with Jean-Paul Sartre, who gave us the action-oriented “To do is to be.” But others side with the more laid-back Socrates, who said “To be is to do.” And the smartest people side with Frank Sinatra, who said “Do be do be do.” We spent all our lives doing and not nearly enough time just being. Sabbath is a time to just be in God's presence, to be still and know that God is God, and we are not.

The reading from Genesis today is an important reminder to me and to all of us that while we may think we know where the road ahead leads us, in reality we are not in control of the future. I like to think I know what's best, that I know exactly what's going to happen, but I think that just makes God laugh when I say that. So while I'm tempted to point to my sabbatical plan and tell you I've dotted all the I's and crossed all the T's for my sabbatical, there's another part of me that's excited – and more than a little anxious – about what God has planned.

That's why the Abram story is such a wonderful commentary on my sabbatical. God comes to Abram and tells him to drop what he's doing. “Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.” In other words, Abram is taking a sabbatical, whether he wants to or not! And all he knows about this upcoming time is what God has promised him: God will lead the way and God will bless Abram along the journey.

Externally, I know where I'll be going and what I'll be doing on my sabbatical. But internally, I have no idea what's going to happen. I've never done this before. I've always been driven by my work, and now I'm stepping back to let God do the driving. I don't like being in the passenger seat, especially when it's my life we're talking about, but I believe that's one of the many lessons God has in store for me. So I am preparing for my journey. Is it scary? Yeah, a bit. But it's also incredibly thrilling.

I'm not the only one that God is calling on a journey. This congregation is also being called to follow God this summer to some unknown destination. Michael and the Sabbatical Planning Team have put together a wonderful plan that will allow the congregation to explore along more deeply along with me the mission statement of the church. As you ponder together what it means to welcome, to equip and to share, I believe that God will be leading you into new territories, opening up new vistas, putting before you new understandings of what it means to be

a community, to be Christians, to be a church. I know it's summer, I know life is busy, but don't miss out on what God has planned for you.

And there's one promise we all can claim as we move into sabbatical time: We will be blessed by God. God tells Abram, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you." Whatever God has in store for us this summer, we can believe that God will be walking with us and that we will be blessed through it. When we come back together in September we won't be the same. I will be a different person, changed by my time away, and I trust you will be different as well, if you are willing to participate in this sabbatical time of rest and renewal.

While I'm gone, I also trust that you are in good hands. You are in Michael's hands. Michael is an incredibly competent, compassionate young man with wisdom beyond his years. He will be an excellent leader for you this summer. You are in Nelson's hands, hands that have touched the heart of this congregation so lovingly for many, many years. And you are in God's hands. That is the safest place to be.

This morning, as I prepare to take my leave and follow God's call, I hope you know you will continue to be in my thoughts and in my prayers this summer, and I hope I am in yours, as well. While you will be out of sight and out of contact, you will not be out of my mind or my heart. The promise that we have been given through Jesus Christ is that we are all connected together as believers, regardless of where we are. When I worship these next three months, although it may be in a different building or in a different town, we will still be praying and singing to the same God, one body united together through Jesus Christ. So I want to give you something to help you remember that (at this point in the sermon, small wooden crosses were handed out to each person). Please keep these crosses close to you this summer. Each time you see it or touch it, say a prayer for me on my sabbatical. Say a prayer for this congregation and for its leaders. And say a prayer of thanksgiving to God for giving us this time. Each time I see this cross, I will remember the holiness of my time away and it doing so I pray I will honor you and honor God.